

Character Analysis and Stock Characters

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The ever-changing and evolving world of theatre is reflective of the dynamic nature of humanity itself. The most popular works of theatre from each decade in the United States all feature important motifs and themes that were prevalent in their respective time periods. For instance, theatrical entertainment of 1920s America spotlighted star performers in Vaudevillian or burlesque style performances; the glitz and glamour of this style of performance served to try and frame the society of the Roaring Twenties as an idyllic paradise full of opulent, expensive costumes and beautiful, modern women. One particular production that serves as a perfect example to emphasize this point is R.H. Burnside's *Good Times*, an extravagant variety act show that opened at the Hippodrome in New York city in 1920. An excerpt from the New York Clipper described *Good Times* as the following:

“For the show, judged from any angle, is positively the greatest and most worth-while (sic) one of its kind this country has ever seen. Its pretentiousness has no equal. Its three acts and fifteen scenes are punched through with riotous color, scenic effects, some of which positively awe the beholder, and rollicking entertainment that has for its motif a horde of capable and versatile entertainers.”

Despite the tone of this review, *Good Times* did not introduce any relatively ground-breaking character types; instead, it relied on typical stock characters and elements for vaudevillian shows. The question remains as to how these stock characters, and the costumes, reflect the atmosphere of 1920's America?

Burnside relied on historical context for the integrated stock character elements in his show. Two particular characters that reinforce this are the Harlequin and the Columbine, two characters that perform a dance in *Good Times*. They draw obvious references from their respective counterparts of Commedia dell'arte, namely Arlecchino and Columbina. This art form was popularized in Italy during the 16th century, performed on streets for the lower classes during this time. The harlequin, Arlecchino is a comedic and spry figure while the columbine, Columbina, is his witty romantic interest. Even today, the character archetypes from Commedia dell'arte are seen in many different entertainment mediums, as audiences are used to understanding these roles and how they can interpret characters placed within them. Despite the twenties ushering an aura of “newness” to the United States, through emerging social revolutions, theatrical entertainment still draws on many old narrative choices to convey stories in safe ways to audiences. A second stock vaudevillian character that mirrored societal opinions is that of the Irishman, who performs a song entitled “You Can't Beat the Luck of the Irish!” This archetype is placed within the overarching narrative of the show to reflect the growing Irish population in the United States, as there was a large immigration between the late 1800s and early 1900s. The Irishman performs a song that plays on typical stereotypes and portrays Irish immigrants as violence-loving and unintelligent. This song reflects the frustrations of the mass Irish immigration during the time and serves as a tool to reduce xenophobia; by portraying the Irishman as a humorous character that proudly embodies his cultural stereotypes, it attempts to capitalize on the fear of the Other in the twenties of America.

As for the costumes of key characters in *Good Times*, they further reflect certain stock elements and entertainment styles of the decade. Typical of the Roaring Twenties, musical revues marketed their star performers as the main “it-factor” for shows in order to draw in audiences. This emphasis on leading players does not digress in *Good Times*, as conveyed through the titular character of Belle Story. Perhaps the most obvious impact of star performers is through the fact that Belle Story shares the exact same name as the artist playing her. Another key factor is in her costuming; the “Truth” design was appropriately referred to as “the thousand-dollar gown” in one review, as Burnside only ordered the most expensive materials for the garment. This also serves to reveal Belle Story’s stock character, “the prima donna,” and ensure that audiences know she is the leading lady that we should be inspired by. However, one must examine this character, and her attire, with a social lens; Belle Story was a beautiful American white woman in the twenties. Naturally, she needed to only be seen in the most opulent costuming in order to reflect how idealized attractive white women were.

Good Times served as the magnum opus of Burnside, utilizing an extreme amount of resources to create a production this extravagant. Audiences loved the show, inspired by the physical and musical prowess of its colorful cast. However, this show would have received much less praise had Burnside been more experimental or polarizing with his stylistic choices; he used a theatrical formula known to be successful for *Good Times* and avoided controversial elements that would overwhelm viewers. This usage of stock characters, and other tactics typical of variety act shows, plus large funding equaled a show that would create his legacy.

Works Cited:

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